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# Merleau-Ponty and Naïve Realism

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper has two aims. The first is to use contemporary discussions of naïve realist theories of perception to offer an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. The second is to use consideration of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception to outline a distinctive version of a naïve realist theory of perception. In a Merleau-Pontian spirit, these two aims are inter-dependent.

Merleau-Ponty's aim in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is to argue that we are embodied subjects, embedded in the world. This account of beings-in-the-world is intended to overcome two pervasive distinctions: between Empiricism and Intellectualism on the one hand, and between Subject and Object on the other.

Merleau-Ponty's account of *embodied subjectivity* attempts to steer a middle way between the extremes of Empiricism and Intellectualism. Empiricists, like psychologists and philosophical naturalists, attempt to explain subjects and subjectivity in purely causal terms. Intellectualists, by contrast, treat subjects either as non-physical entities that co-exist with purely physical objects (as Descartes and Cartesians suggest), or else as acosmic transcendental Egos — or, as Merleau-Ponty often refers to them, “constituting consciousnesses” — that exist outside of physical space and time (as Kant and post-Kantian Idealists suggest).

Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied subjects as essentially *embodied*, meanwhile, attempts to dissolve the sharp distinction between conscious subjects and physical objects. From an ontological point of view, perceiving subjects are not immaterial, and objects are not merely physical; rather, perceiving subjects are bodily subjects, and the things that appear to us in perceptual experience are “burdened with anthropological predicates” (PP 334). From a phenomenological point of view, self-awareness through the “body schema” already implies awareness of our environment. We are not aware of ourselves in merely “positional” spatial terms: that is, as one object amongst others located in objective space. Rather our awareness of ourselves

involves a kind of “situational spatiality”. We are aware of ourselves as body-subjects through being aware of the “milieu” in which we situated, and the possibilities for action that this milieu affords (PP 102); as such, Merleau-Ponty argues that “the ‘body schema’ is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world” (PP 103). This account of our nature as embodied, embedded subjects in turn grounds Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception: as he says in the Introduction to Part II of *Phenomenology of Perception*, having outlined his account of the body in Part I, “The theory of the body is already a theory of perception” (PP 209).

A number of recent discussions of Merleau-Ponty in the Anglophone tradition have drawn comparisons to contemporary debates about enactive theories of perception (e.g. Noë 2006), whether the content of perceptual experience is non-conceptual (e.g. Kelly 2001, Carman 2008: 220–3), and the kind of disjunctivist theory of perception defended by McDowell (e.g. Jensen 2013, Berendzen 2013). This paper explores a different comparison: that between Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception and contemporary naïve realist theories of perception.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project is, in part, a reaction to Kantian and post-Kantian Idealism as it manifested itself primarily in France and Germany, contemporary naïve realist theories of perception have their roots in the response of Oxford Realists like Cook Wilson, Pritchard, and Austin to predominantly British manifestations of post-Kantian Idealism in the later nineteenth century (cf. Kalderon and Travis 2013). Contemporary naïve realist theories of perception are philosophical theories of perception, and as such embody substantive philosophical claims. Naïve realist theories of perception are not a natural kind, and come in a variety of different forms; however, they commonly embody a commitment to some or all of the following theoretical claims: First, perceptual experiences are essentially *relational*, in the sense that they are constituted in part by

those things in the perceiver’s environment that they are experiences of. Second, the relational nature of perceptual experience cannot be explained in terms of perceptual experiences having *representational content* that is veridical if the things in the subject’s environment are as they are represented as being and non-veridical otherwise. Third, the claim that perceptual experiences are essentially relational articulates the distinctive phenomenological character of perceptual experience, or “what it is like” for a subject to have an experience. Fourth, given that veridical perceptual experiences are essentially relational, they differ in kind to non-veridical experiences such as hallucinations. Fifth, perceptual experiences are relations to specifically *mind-independent* objects, properties, and relations: things whose nature and existence are constitutively independent of the psychological responses of perceiving subjects.

The following sections consider these claims in turn. In §§1–4, I argue that Merleau-Ponty can be understood as endorsing interesting versions of the first four claims associated with contemporary naïve realism, and to this extent he accepts something like a naïve realist theory of perception. In §5, I argue that the comparison with naïve realism breaks down insofar as Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception, at least in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, appears to be broadly idealistic in a way that contemporary forms of naïve realism tend not to be. I conclude by highlighting a further meta-philosophical difference between Merleau-Ponty’s approach and that of contemporary naïve realists, which points to the possibility of a view that I call *transcendental naïve realism*.

## 1. Relationality

According to the naïve realist, perceptual experiences are essentially relational. The essential relationality of experience is to be understood in a particularly strong sense: on this view, perceptual experiences are constituted, at least in part, by the things — objects, properties, relations — in a subject’s environment that they are experiences of. The claim that perceptual experiences are essentially relational in this way

1. See, for instance, Martin (2002, 2004, 2006), Campbell (2002), Travis (2004), Fish (2009), Brewer (2011), Logue (2012), and Soteriou (2013).

has modal consequences: a particular experience could not have occurred if the subject had not been perceptually related to precisely those elements of the environment. It follows that if there is nothing of the appropriate kind in the subject's environment that the subject is related to, then there is no perceptual experience — even if it seems to the subject that there is.

Naïve realist theories of perception contrast in this respect with theories of perception according to which perceptual experiences are essentially relational, but according to which they involve standing in a relation to something other than things in the subject's environment — as, for instance, on sense-datum theories of perception, where perceptual experiences involve “direct” awareness of sense-data (e.g. Price 1932).<sup>2</sup> Naïve realist theories of perception also contrast in this respect with theories of perception according to which perceptual experiences are not essentially relational: for instance, adverbialist theories of perception, according to which perceptual experiences are “adverbial modifications” of conscious subjects (e.g. Ducasse 1942); and standard forms of intentionalism (or representationalism), according to which perceptual experiences represent things in the subject's environment as being a certain way, and are veridical if the things in the subject's environment are the way that they are represented as being, and non-veridical otherwise (see e.g. Crane 2009). On all of these views, how things are with the subject is constitutively independent (at least on a particular occasion) of how things are in the subject's environment: it is possible for the subject to have exactly the same kind of experience whether or not the environment is as it is perceived to be.

Merleau-Ponty accepts that perceptual experience is relational in the strong sense accepted by naïve realists. According to Merleau-Ponty, ‘see’ — and ‘perceive’ more generally — are what Ryle (1949) would

2. Some sense-datum theorists sought to argue that sense-data “belong to” things in the environment; however, even so understood, sense-data are necessarily distinct from material objects, to allow that veridical and non-veridical experiences form a common kind.

call “success words”. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “If I see an ashtray *in the full sense of the word ‘see’*, then there must be an ashtray over there” (PP 393).

It is possible to accept that ‘see’ (“in the full sense of the word”) is a success term, but nevertheless deny that perceptual experiences are essentially relational: for instance, if ‘see’ and ‘perceive’ can be truly applied only in cases where there is a psychological event that is common to the “good” case of veridical perception and the “bad” cases of illusion and hallucination, and where this psychological event meets further non-psychological conditions, such as being caused in the appropriate way. But this is not Merleau-Ponty's view.

The context of this remark is a discussion (and rejection) of the Cartesian claim that the mind is better known than the body. For Descartes, even if a doubt can be raised about the nature and existence of the external world that a perceptual experience is an experience of, we can at least be certain of the nature and occurrence of the experience itself *qua* mental phenomenon. As Descartes puts it:

I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called “having a sensory perception” is strictly just this (1642: 19).

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, insists that “[p]erception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality” (PP 393); this is to say that if I am perceiving, then necessarily what I am perceiving exists. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no psychological event of “having a sensory perception” that is independent of the way things are in the subject's environment, and so which is common to the “good” and “bad” cases. To suppose otherwise, he thinks, would be to think of vision “as the contemplation of a drifting and anchorless *quale*”, rather than an awareness of qualities of particular objects, where this awareness of qualities of particular objects “presupposes our opening onto a

real or onto a world" (PP 393). If there is no object of the appropriate kind in the subject's environment, there is simply no perception:

if I raise a doubt as to the presence of the thing, this doubt bears upon vision itself; if there is no red or blue over there, then I say that I have not *really seen* them (PP 393; see further §4 below).

The relational nature of Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual experience is reflected in his account of the relationship between sensing subjects and sensible objects. For Merleau-Ponty, the sensing and the sensible are:

not opposite each other like two external terms, and sensation does not consist of the sensible invading the sensing being. ... In this exchange between the subject of sensation and the sensible, it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action, nor that one gives sense to the other (PP 221–2).

To say that the sensing and the sensible are "not opposite each other like two external terms" is to say that they are not radically different types of entity that are only contingently related, for instance, via efficient causal relations. Objects do not cause sensations in perceiving subjects, as on Empiricist views. Nor is it the case that conscious subjects "constitute" sensible objects, as transcendental idealist forms of Intellectualism maintain. Rather, "sensation is, literally, a communion" (PP 219) or "coexistence" (PP 221) between sensing and sensible. That is, sensory experience does not merely "symbolize", or represent, sensible objects, as on Protestant interpretations of communion in which the bread and wine merely symbolize the body and blood of Christ (PP 219). Rather, sensing bodies "take up" sensible objects in experience; there is, when we are suitably "geared into" the world, a "coupling of our body with the things" (PP 334). As such, sensible objects become present to sensing subjects in something like the way that orthodox

Catholicism holds that God is really present in the bread and wine during communion — at least to those whose are appropriately receptive (PP 219).

The Eucharistic analogy is not meant to suggest that sensing subjects take on the attributes of the sensible; they do not themselves become, in any sense, coloured or shaped. This is not a form of adverbialism, according to which perceptual experiences are conscious modifications of perceiving subjects that can be differently adverbially modified: it is not, for example, that in the presence of a red square, a subject will perceive redly and squarely. Adverbialism assumes a strict separation of sensing subjects and sensible objects that Merleau-Ponty is at pains to deny.

For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between sensing and sensible is much closer: there is an intertwining of the sensing and the sensible in perception.<sup>3</sup> The sensible provides a "vague solicitation" that "poses to my body a sort of confused problem" (PP 222). The sensible can then be explored by my "gaze": the "mechanism" which mediates between appearances and bodily behaviour, and so which allows us to respond our environment's solicitations "given their sense" (PP 323). But I am able to explore the sensible environment "only ... in response to its solicitation" (PP 222). All this is made possible by my openness to the world through the senses, which obtains in virtue of my embodied existence:

To say that I have a visual field means that I have an access and an opening to a system of visible beings through my position, and that they are available to my gaze in virtue of a kind of primordial contract and by a gift of nature, without any effort on my part. In other words, it means that vision is pre-personal (PP 224).

3. However, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that this co-existence with objects does not amount to a perfect *coincidence* of subject and object in perception: perception is perspectival, and we never fully grasp the object that we commune with (e.g. PP 69–74, 224).

As the analogy with communion suggests, Merleau-Ponty thinks that there is something mysterious, even miraculous, about perceptual experience: “One can say, if you like, that the relation of the thing perceived to perception ... is a magical relation in naïve consciousness” (SB 189). To this extent, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the relationship between sensing and sensible is reminiscent of Russell’s (disparaging) description of his (earlier) conception of knowledge by acquaintance as involving “something like a mystic union of knower and known” (1921: 234).

## 2. Representational Content

Proponents of naïve realist theories of perception can be described as accepting a form of “austere relationalism” to the extent that they hold that perceptual experiences consist most fundamentally in the obtaining of a certain kind of relation between subjects and objects — a relation that is something like Russell’s (1910) non-propositional relation of acquaintance. On this view, perceptual experiences are not essentially representational: there is no essential, non-derivative, sense in which our perceptual experiences represent the environment as being a certain way. Rather, the attitudes — typically judgments — that perceivers adopt towards what is presented in perception are constitutively distinct from perceptual experiences themselves; at best, perceptual experiences have representational content only derivatively or non-essentially, in virtue of the content of distinct attitudes towards what the subject is acquainted with in experience. This, for instance, is the import of Travis’s claims that the senses are “silent”:

rather than *representing* anything as so, our senses merely bring our surroundings into view; afford us some sort of awareness of them. It is then for us to make of what is in our view what we can, or do (Travis 2004: 64).

Austere relationalist forms of naïve realism contrast with standard intentionalist theories of perception in this respect. According to

standard intentionalist theories of perception, perceptual experiences are representational events or states that are individuated, at least in part, by their intentional or representational content. This content is itself determined by accuracy or correctness conditions: conditions that specify how things must be in the subject’s environment if the experience is veridical.

The claim that perceptual experiences are essentially relational does not suffice to distinguish naïve realism from *all* forms of intentionalism. Some intentionalists insist that there is a sense in which perceptual experience is essentially relational, because perceptual experience essentially involves representational content that needs to be relationally individuated: for instance, because it involves object-dependent demonstrative content such as *this is F* (e.g. McDowell 1994), or it involves potentially gappy representational contents consisting of *de re* modes of presentation of particular objects and properties (e.g. Schellenberg 2011). Whilst it can become difficult to see exactly what is at stake between naïve realists and intentionalists of this kind, the debate can be understood as a disagreement about what explains the relational nature of perception. Intentionalists of this kind will typically seek to *explain* the obtaining of a relation between perceivers and their environment in terms of the way their environment is represented as being; indeed, they will typically insist that the obtaining of the perceptual relation simply *consists in* experience representing the world in the particular way it does. As McDowell, for instance, puts it:

it is precisely by virtue of having content as they do that perceptual experiences put us in such relations to things (2013: 144).

Intentionalists who individuate the content of experience relationally differ in this respect from naïve realists. According to naïve realists, the obtaining of the perceptual relation is distinct from, and standardly more basic than, the intentional attitudes that we can adopt towards



that which we are perceptually related to. As Soteriou, for instance, remarks:

the claim that the relevant psychological relation is non-representational should be understood in terms of the idea that the obtaining of the relation is not simply determined by the obtaining of a mental state that has an intentional content with veridicality conditions — irrespective of whether the mental state in question is a factive one, and irrespective of whether the content of the state is object-involving (2013: 107; see also Brewer 2011: 131).

One way of interpreting Merleau-Ponty — the “overcomer of distinctions” — is as suggesting a middle way between the extremes of austere relationalism and intentionalism. Merleau-Ponty is hostile to views according to which perception involves “representation”. As he says while considering the perception of three-dimensional objects from a particular point of view, for example:

Should we say, as psychologists often have done, that I *represent* to myself the sides of this lamp which are not seen? If I say these sides are representations, I imply that they are not grasped as actually existing; because what is represented is not here before us, I do not actually perceive it (PrP 13; see also PP lxxiii–lxxiv, SB 224).

Of itself, this doesn’t necessarily mean that he rejects an intentionalist theory of perception. Merleau-Ponty typically means by “representation” something intellectual, that is voluntary and involves the application of concepts: what Husserl calls “act intentionality” (PP lxxii; cf. e.g. PP 247). By contrast, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that there is a distinct kind of “operative intentionality” that underlies thought and judgment; as he puts it in “The Primacy of Perception”, perceptual experience is “an original modality of consciousness” (PrP 12). This might in turn be thought to suggest a commitment to

an intentionalist theory of perception according to which the content of perceptual experience is non-conceptual. But this may also be too quick. As Merleau-Ponty notes, although intentionality is often cited as “the principal discovery” of the phenomenological movement, the basic claim that “all consciousness is consciousness of something” is widely accepted (PP lxxxiii). It was accepted, for instance, by Kant, albeit in an overly intellectualist form. In a different way, it is also something accepted by naïve realists, for whom the intentionality, or “aboutness”, of perceptual experience is to be explained by the fact that perceptual experiences consist in the obtaining of a conscious relation of acquaintance to things in our environment. For the naïve realist, our perceptual experiences are “about” (“of”, or “directed at”) those things in our environment that we are consciously acquainted with. Given the relational nature of acquaintance, there can be no conscious acquaintance without an object of acquaintance, and hence the naïve realist too can accept that “all consciousness is consciousness of something”. We therefore cannot conclude simply from the fact that Merleau-Ponty thinks that perceptual experiences are intentional in the sense of exhibiting “aboutness” — that “all consciousness is consciousness of something” — that they are intentional in the sense of being fundamentally representational states or events that are individuated by their representational content, non-conceptual or otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

An alternative way of interpreting Merleau-Ponty is as claiming that perceptual experience consists *essentially but not exclusively* in the obtaining of a relation of acquaintance between subjects and objects. Merleau-Ponty agrees with the relationalist that openness to the world is necessary for perceptual experience: as Merleau-Ponty says, the world of objects is “available to my gaze in virtue of a kind

4. See e.g. Siewert (2016) for different ways of understanding “intentionality”: for instance, being “about” (“of” or “directed at”) an object; being about (of, or directed at) a possibly non-existent object; having accuracy conditions (or conditions of satisfaction more generally); and having representational content. Although these different ways of understanding “intentionality” are often run together, to say that experiences are intentional in one sense need not be to say that they are intentional in another.

of primordial contract and by a gift of nature, without any effort required on my part" (PP 224). However, acquaintance with the world of objects is not of itself sufficient for perceptual experience. Perceptual experience itself *also* essentially involves taking things to be a certain way — that is, it also involves a kind of representational content. And this, in turn, involves the operation of the gaze, the mechanism that allows us to explore and interrogate our environment. Mere openness to the world without the operation of the gaze is not sufficient for perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, for instance, the dimension of "[d]epth is born before my gaze because my gaze attempts to see *something*" (PP 274), and so "passive vision with no gaze, such as the case of a dazzling light ... does not display an objective space before us" (PP 329). As such, vision "is only inwardly prepared for by my primordial opening to a field of transcendences" but "is accomplished and fulfilled in the thing seen" (PP 395). Given that we cannot perceive without the operation of the gaze, and that it is by means of the gaze that we take the world to be a certain way, perceptual experience essentially involves taking the world to be a certain way — that is, it essentially involves a certain kind of content. In keeping with Merleau-Ponty's anti-Intellectualism, the additional "taking" that is partially constitutive of perceptual experience is not an intellectual judgment, but rather a form of "bodily understanding":

a thing is not actually *given* in perception, it is inwardly taken up by us, reconstituted and lived by us insofar as it is linked to a world whose fundamental structures we carry within ourselves and of which this thing is just one of several possible concretions (PP 341).

Merleau-Ponty's view therefore potentially differs from that of austere relationalists twice over: first, in claiming that perceptual experience consists essentially but not exclusively in the obtaining of a relation of acquaintance; and second, in claiming that the attitudes that we adopt towards the world are not primarily belief-like propositional attitudes, but consist instead in a kind of bodily understanding.

Perceptual experience so understood is not a two-stage process. Nor are our openness to the world and our ability to explore it via the gaze and thereby take it to be a certain way distinct aspects of experience that can be understood independently of each other. We can think of this as providing a twist on one interpretation of the Kantian thesis that "intuitions without concepts are blind". On this interpretation, intuition is a kind of non-propositional relation of acquaintance, and the twist is that this acquaintance relation is blind, not without concepts, but without bodily understanding.<sup>5</sup> This is not simply a form of intentionalism according to which the content of experience is non-conceptual, because the obtaining of the acquaintance relation in perception is not itself to be explained in terms of the way that the environment is taken (in a bodily way) to be; rather, openness to the world, and exploration of it via the gaze, is what makes possible taking the environment to be a certain way. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty accepts a core commitment of contemporary naïve realism. But nor is this simply an austere relationalist form of naïve realism, because the openness to the world is not itself more fundamental than our ability to take it to be a certain way: to be open to the world is for the world to be available for exploration by the gaze, and so available to be taken a certain way; and we cannot understand what it is to be open to the world such that it is not open to exploration by the gaze and not available to be taken up by us. In a characteristically Merleau-Pontian fashion, these two aspects of perceptual experience are inter-dependent.<sup>6</sup>

5. For interpretations of Kantian intuition as a form of acquaintance, see Allais (2015), McLear (2016), and Gomes (2017).

6. If a core commitment of naïve realism is the denial that perceptual experiences have representational content essentially, then Merleau-Ponty's hybrid position is not a form of naïve realism; it is at best a "naïve realist-like" theory. Assuming some flexibility in what the core commitments of naïve realism are, however, Merleau-Ponty's position counts as a form of naïve realism insofar as he accepts that the intentional content of experience is not explanatorily more basic than its relationality. For slightly different forms of hybrid theory, see e.g. Soteriou (2013) and Logue (2014).



### 3. Phenomenology

I have argued so far that Merleau-Ponty agrees with the naïve realist that perceptual experiences are essentially relational, and that the relationality of experience cannot be explained exclusively in terms of our experience representing the environment as being a certain way — although I have suggested that he offers a distinctive, hybrid, account of the relationship between acquaintance and (bodily) representational content that differs from that standardly provided by naïve realists, by insisting that perceptual experiences are essentially but not exclusively relational. But why should we accept that perceptual experience is essentially relational?

A common line of argument for contemporary naïve realist theories of perception is that they best explain and articulate the phenomenological character of veridical perceptual experience, or, in less technical terms, “what it is like” to be a subject of experience. My aim in this section is to show that Merleau-Ponty presents a distinctive version of this line of argument.

One widely discussed aspect of the phenomenology of perceptual experience is the “transparency of experience”. As G.E. Moore famously remarks:

When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous (1903: 450).

The claim that perceptual experience is transparent can be understood as the conjunction of a positive and a negative claim (cf. Martin 2002). The positive claim is that when we reflect on perceptual experience, we are aware of environmental objects, properties, and relations. The negative claim is that when we reflect on experience, we are not aware of any mental objects (such as sense-data or images) or any qualitative properties of the experience itself (sensations or qualia).

Merleau-Ponty accepts both the positive and the negative claims.

On the positive side, Merleau-Ponty insists that we perceive both objects and their properties. So, for instance:

When I perceive a thing such as a fireplace, it is not the concordance of its various appearances that leads me to believe in the existence of the fireplace as the geometrical plan and common signification of all of these perspectives. On the contrary, I perceive the thing in its own clarity (PP 191).

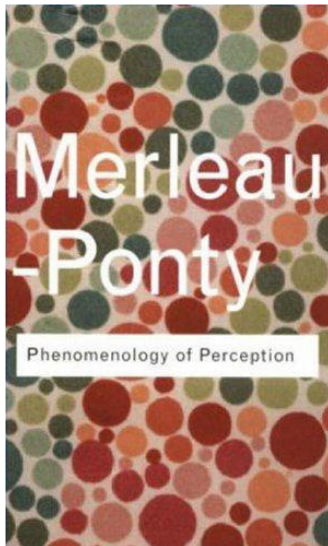
Just as we perceive objects, and not merely their appearances, Merleau-Ponty insists that we perceive the constant properties of objects, too: we perceive their size, form, colour, sound, temperature, and weight, and not merely the appearances they present from particular perspectives (PP 312–8). Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, we perceive the constant properties of things *because* we perceive the objects that they are properties of, and we perceive both because, more fundamentally, we are open to the *world*:

The constancy of colour is merely an abstract moment of the constancy of things, and the constancy of things is established upon the primordial consciousness of the world as the horizon of all our experiences (PP 326).

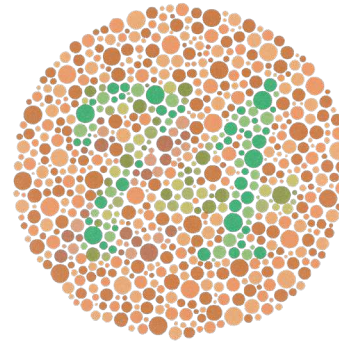
On the negative side, Merleau-Ponty insists that we are not aware of any mental objects or qualitative properties of experience. As he says in his earlier work *The Structure of Behaviour*, we are not perceptually aware of any mental objects distinct from the things themselves:

it is the thing itself which naïve consciousness thinks it is reaching, and not some inner double, some subjective reproduction. It does not imagine that the body or that mental “representations” function as a screen between itself and reality (SB 186).

Carrying on this spirit, the *Phenomenology of Perception* begins by deconstructing the “classical prejudice” of much philosophy and psychology that perceptual experience involves the having of sensations, where a sensation is understood as an “undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual ‘jolt’” (PP 3). The choice of cover design for the once-standard English translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* by Colin Smith (Figure 1) is unfortunate in this respect. The cover shows a detail from an Ishihara Colour Test plate, which is suggestive of precisely the kind of atomistic theory of perception that Merleau-Ponty is at pains to reject. Indeed, seen in its entirety, an Ishihara plate — in which differently coloured circles coalesce to present different numbers to people with “normal” colour vision and those who are “colour-blind” (Figure 2) — illustrates perfectly one of the key principles of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception: that “a figure against a background is the most basic sensible given we can have” (PP 4).



**Figure 1:** Cover, *Phenomenology of Perception* translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002).



**Figure 2:** Ishihara Colour Plate.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ishihara\\_9.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ishihara_9.png)

There is a sense in which Merleau-Ponty does not think that perceptual experience is *entirely* transparent. He is, for example, prepared to allow that phenomenological reflection, via the phenomenological reductions — and in particular the *epoché*, or “putting the world in brackets” — “loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear” (PP lxxvii). This reveals, amongst other things, essential structural properties of perceptual experience, such as its basic figure-ground configuration, or the way that experiences of the background become indeterminate when we focus our attention on a figure.

But these are not properties of experience that are anything like sensations, properties of a subjective visual field, or qualia. Rather, they are essential properties of experience that determine, or structure, the way that objects that are independent of our experiences are presented.<sup>7</sup> Reflective awareness of experience *as such* is therefore

7. Compare Martin’s (1992) account of the visual field as that which delimits, or sets boundaries to, a region of physical space (see also Richardson 2010). In general, it is consistent with naïve realism to allow that the phenomenal

necessarily incomplete, because our experiences are essentially experiences of the world that is independent of us. Merleau-Ponty's execution of the phenomenological project differs importantly in this respect from Husserl's, at least at the time of the *Cartesian Meditations*. Husserl attempts to use the phenomenological reductions ultimately as a means to uncover the "inner man", or transcendental Ego:

the being of the pure ego and his *cogitationes*, as a being that is prior in itself, is antecedent to the natural being of the world .... The fundamental phenomenological method of transcendental *epoché* ... leads back to this realm (1931: §8).

For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (PP lxxvii). The necessary failure of the attempt to carry through the *epoché*, and uncover a purely inner realm of subjective experience, shows that there is no "inner man", but that we are most fundamentally beings-in-the-world.<sup>8</sup>

It is controversial to what extent the (putative) phenomenological datum that perceptual experience is transparent supports the naïve realist's claim that perceptual experience is essentially relational.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, it is possible to hold that although experience *appears* transparent, the appearances are misleading in this respect; this might be a cost of a theory of perception, but perhaps it is one that is ultimately acceptable given other theoretical benefits. On the other hand, as Martin (2002) argues, the transparency of experience may seem to be equally well explained by both naïve realist and intentionalist theories of perception. The naïve realist explains the phenomenologi-

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character of experience is determined, at least in part, by the specific way that we are acquainted with things in our environment. For discussion, see e.g. Logue (2012), French (2014).

8. For discussion of Merleau-Ponty's attitude towards the phenomenological reduction, see Smith (2005).
9. Indeed, it is controversial even whether it is a phenomenological datum. For some relevant discussion, see e.g. Crane (2000), although I will not consider this issue further here.

cal datum on the grounds that perceptual experiences are relational events that are in part constituted by the things in the perceiver's environment that they are experiences of (2002: 399). The intentionalist, by contrast, explains the transparency of experience in terms of the way the environment is represented in experience (2002: 380–5). Unlike other types of representational state — for instance, imagining or hoping — perceptual experiences are not neutral with respect to the existence of the objects represented; as such, perceptual experiences have a certain kind of authority over belief, in that we tend to believe things are as they seem. The intentionalist can explain this feature of perceptual experience on the assumption that perceptual experience is a distinctive type of representational state that involves an assortive attitude towards the experience's intentional content (2002: 386–92). This, in turn, provides the intentionalist with a way of capturing at least some of the sense of the intuitions that perceptual experiences are "immediate" and "direct".

Martin himself is sceptical about the prospects of adjudicating the dispute between naïve realists and intentionalists based directly on how experience seems to us, because he thinks the phenomenological data will underdetermine the choice between naïve realism and intentionalism:

When we come to state the differences between the two positions, we find ourselves talking in terms of notions of modality and constitution. One might be sceptical whether it could really be part of any common sense view that objects were or were not constituents of our experiences of them (2002: 398).

If this is right, one option for the naïve realist would be to look to the epistemic consequences of the two views to provide a way of differentiating them (in different ways, see e.g. Campbell 2002, Logue 2012). Martin himself thinks that because the naïve realist claims to be "doing justice to some common sense or naïve intuition" about how experience appears, then there should be some way of settling

the dispute between the naïve realist and the intentionalist that relates to “an account of perceptual appearances” (2002: 398); his way of arguing for naïve realism appeals to differences between perception and sensory imagination that he claims the naïve realist is in a better position to explain. Whatever the merits of these alternative ways of motivating naïve realism, what I want to suggest in the remainder of the section is that the materials for a more direct adjudication of the dispute between the naïve realist and the intentionalist may be found in Merleau-Ponty.

In the final chapter of *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes common sense descriptions of perception from “lived perception”. According to Merleau-Ponty, common sense descriptions of perception treat perceptual experiences as causal impressions (“transitive” effects) of distinct existences. This view, which Merleau-Ponty associates with the term ‘naïve realism’ (see also PP 510 n. 60; PrP 38), is a product of what he would later describe as “Objective Thought”: the tendency in common sense and scientific thinking to abstract from lived experience and think of the world in determinate, causal, terms (cf. PP 73–4). From the lived perspective, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the things we perceive do not seem to be the causes of our experiences:

It seems to me rather that my perception is like a beam of light which reveals the objects there where they are and manifests their presence, latent until then. Whether I myself perceive or consider another subject perceiving, it seems to me that the gaze “is posed” on objects and reaches them from a distance — as is well expressed by the use of the Latin *lumina* for designating the gaze (SB 185).<sup>10</sup>

10. This is qualified slightly in the *Phenomenology*, when Merleau-Ponty asks (rhetorically), “Shall we say that perception reveals objects as the lamp illuminates them at night? Must we embrace the realism that, as Malebranche said, imagines the soul going out through the eyes and visiting the objects in the world?” (PP 251–2). But at least in part, the emphasis here is on resisting Intellectualist views that attempt to dissociate perceptual experiences from their context: “sensation can no more than any other perception be separated from

There are at least two aspects to this description of the phenomenological character of visual experience, and they are nicely captured by C.D. Broad’s claim that visual experience appears to be both “saltatory” and “prehensive” (1952: 5).<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, visual experience is “saltatory” in that it “seems to leap the spatial gap between the perceiver’s body and a remote region of space” — or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the gaze “reaches [objects] from a distance”. On the other hand, visual experience is “prehensive of the surfaces of distant bodies as coloured and extended” in the sense that it seems to put us into a kind of *contact* with objects — or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, our gaze seems to be “posed on” objects. This is one of a number of tactile metaphors that Merleau-Ponty uses to describe perception: in perception we “gear into” the world (e.g. PP 261) like the teeth in two cogs meshing together,<sup>12</sup> “couple our body with the things” (e.g. PP 334), “take up” the sensible (e.g. PP 219), get a “grip” or “hold” on things (e.g. PP 273), or investigate objects with “a palpation of the look” (e.g. VI 131). But whereas Broad, a sense-datum theorist, thinks that these appearances are ultimately misleading, Merleau-Ponty develops a philosophical theory of perception that attempts to explain and articulate this aspect of how lived experience appears.

These claims about the nature of perceptual experience go beyond the minimal claim that perceptual experience is transparent. The transparency claim is primarily a claim about *what* we are and are not aware of in perceptual experience: we are aware of things in our environment and not any mental objects or sensations. The claim that perceptual experience is ostensibly saltatory and prehensive, like a beam of light that reveals objects in the environment, by contrast, is a

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a background that is, ultimately, the world” (PP 251). Hence it is not so much that Merleau-Ponty is resisting the view that perception is like a beam of light, but that the light is revealing objects that are otherwise in darkness.

11. See also Fish (2009: 3–4) and Kalderon (2011b: 223; 2017) for further discussion of Broad’s description.

12. As Landes notes (PP 496, n. 47), *engener* (“to gear into”) also has the sense of “to adjust to”, suggesting that the intermeshing of body and world isn’t rigidly determined in advance, in the way that the meshing of cogs is.

claim about the *way* that we are aware of objects in experience. These are distinct claims, since there may be other ways that we can be aware of the very same things: for instance, perhaps sensory imagination or thought provide different ways of being aware of things. This claim about the way that things are presented in experience is suggestive of the naïve realist's claim that perceptual experiences are relational events that are partly constituted by objects in our environment. The claim that perceptual experiences are partly constituted by external objects provides a straightforward explanation of the sense that perceptual experience puts us into a kind of contact with spatially distant objects: visual experience ostensibly leaps out to, and grasps, objects in virtue of the fact that those objects are literally constituents of the experience.<sup>13</sup>

This line of argument for naïve realism raises two questions. First, should we accept the description of the phenomenological character of experience suggested by Broad and Merleau-Ponty? Second, does this provide a reason based on the way experience appears to prefer naïve realism to intentionalism? I will consider these questions in turn.

Providing a description of perceptual appearances on which everyone agrees is notoriously difficult. Just as the putative phenomenological datum that visual experience is transparent is sometimes denied, the claim that visual experience is ostensibly saltatory and prehensive might also be resisted. So how might we argue for this claim?

If Merleau-Ponty is right, then common sense descriptions of experience are liable to misrepresent the phenomena; we therefore cannot

necessarily rely on the (typically assumed) judgments of "the man on the Clapham omnibus", since the mythical "common man" will normally be in the throes of "Objective Thought".

One option, following a suggestion by Fish (2009: 18–20), would be to appeal to the judgment of experts in phenomenological study. This strategy faces a number of challenges. An initial challenge is to identify the phenomenological experts in advance of knowing which judgments about the nature of experience are correct. Related to this, there is the challenge of identifying the correct method for determining the phenomenological character of experience in advance of knowing what experience is really like. These two concerns are exacerbated by the fact that amongst the class of people whom it might be natural to describe as "experts", there may be disagreement, both about the methods to be adopted and about the results that these methods deliver. Still, it is at least striking that Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomenological character of experience is similar to the independent description provided by Broad, who was not only working in a different philosophical tradition to Merleau-Ponty, but who described visual perception as seemingly "saltatory" and "prehensive" *despite* being under the influence of Objective Thought, and so who ultimately took the appearances to be misleading in this respect. This convergence in judgment provides some corroboration for their descriptions.<sup>14</sup>

However, rather than pursue this approach further here, I want to consider a different, but complementary, way of arguing for the phenomenological datum suggested by Merleau-Ponty. Instead of appealing to the judgments of phenomenological experts, an alternative is to try to elicit descriptions of experience that are untainted by Objective Thought. Children are a potentially promising source in this respect. In considering the child's experience of the inter-subjective world,

13. This thought might be at least nascent in the transparency intuition, depending on exactly how "awareness" of things in our environment is understood: if it is understood in a strong, object-involving way, then the contact intuition might just be one way of further describing the transparency intuition. It is worth noting that there is a slightly different intuition that is sometimes appealed to in discussions of phenomenal character: that the phenomenal character of experience is "inherited from" that which it is an experience of (the phrase comes from Campbell 1993; see also Shoemaker 2003, Kalderon 2011a). The inheritance intuition is arguably stronger than the transparency intuition (Allen 2016: 13–4), but weaker than the contact claim, since it doesn't further specify the way in which the phenomenal character is inherited.

14. For a more detailed defence of phenomenological method, see Zahavi's (2007) response to Dennett. See also Siewert (2007) for the claim that we can resolve phenomenological disputes by philosophically enriched first-person reflection.



Merleau-Ponty appeals to findings by Piaget which suggest a description of the phenomenological character of experience that is similar to that which he gives in *The Structure of Behaviour*:

The child lives in a world that he believes is immediately accessible to everyone around him. ... For the child, others are so many gazes inspecting things, they have an almost material existence, to the point that one child wonders how these gazes are not broken when they meet (PP 371).

The view of perception that this suggests has similarities to ancient extramissionist theories of perception, associated with Plato, Euclid, Ptolemy, and Al-Kindi, and according to which vision involves some kind of output from the eye. Subsequent studies have since confirmed the existence of widespread broadly extramissionist intuitions about vision in children (e.g. Winer and Cottrell 1996). Perhaps more strikingly, they have also found that extramissionist intuitions can typically be elicited in around 50% of adults — including university students who have just taken an introductory course on vision science (Winer *et al.* 2002).

One way of testing this involves asking subjects which of a series of representations (typically on a computer monitor) best describes what occurs when people see. Subjects are presented with diagrams of the profile of a face on one side of a screen and a green rectangle on the other, and five possible relationships between the two. Dots are seen to move either from the rectangle to the eye, from the eye to the rectangle, from the rectangle to the eye and back, from the eye to the rectangle and back, or simultaneously to and from the eye. Typically around 50% of participants — even those who have just taken the introductory course on vision science — prefer one of the extramissionist responses, in which dots move from the eye to the object. The most highly favoured are those that involve simultaneous input and output, and those in which input to the eye is followed by output to the object. Winer *et al.* suggest that these beliefs are both widespread and largely

immune to training because they reflect the phenomenological character of visual experience: “Vision is generally thought of as directed outward, away from the self, toward specific objects” (2002: 423).

These results provide at least indirect support for the claim that visual experience is ostensibly saltatory and prehensive, and as such appears to be constituted in part by its objects. These results would not naturally be taken as evidence of a constitutive view of perceptual experience if the output from the eye involved something like an efficient causal process; this would be more naturally suggestive of a variation on the view that Merleau-Ponty ascribes to common sense, according to which perceptual experiences are distinct existences from that which they are experiences of, but on which the efficient causal process that results in a perceptual experience requires some additional input from the subject. However, there are reasons to resist this interpretation of the findings. In the case of children, for instance, an earlier researcher notes:

For children the movement that goes from the eyes to the object remains abstract. It is thus clearly differentiated from the “visual fire” of early theories, from the “fluid” emitted by the eyes of witches in fairy tales or from the red rays that are beamed from Superman’s eyes. Only the idea that the subject is at the origin of a process, instead of being at the receiving end, is common to these various ways of portraying sight (Guesne 1985: 26).

Besides, thinking of that which is directed outwards in vision as being part of an efficient causal process isn’t obviously consistent with the most highly favoured extramissionist responses, according to which there is a simultaneous input and output, or views according to which there is an input followed by an output.

Assuming that the visual experience is ostensibly saltatory and prehensive, the second question is whether this provides a reason to prefer the claim that perceptual experiences are essentially relational. According to non-relationalist views, perceptual experiences are



distinct from, and merely causally responsive to, mind-independent objects. It may be possible for non-relationists to explain why experiences are non-neutral with respect to the existence of objects in the environment. As Martin (2002) notes, for instance, intentionalists can explain the non-neutrality of perceptual experiences with respect to the existence of the objects they represent in terms of the type of representational state they are: experiences have “authority over beliefs” because they represent things in the environment as being a certain way. But it is far from clear that this captures the distinctive *way* in which objects are presented in experience: that non-neutrally representing the existence of objects in the environment is sufficient to explain the sense of contact with them that extramissionist intuitions point to.

It might be suggested that the extramissionist intuitions are broadly consistent with an intentionalist theory of perception according to which experiences are distinct from, and caused by, external objects, but where the output from the eye is something like a representational or referential relation. This would fit most neatly with the scenario in which an input to the eye is followed by output to the object. However, it is difficult to see how it is consistent with the view that input and output are simultaneous, or with the pure extramissionist responses. By contrast, the naïve realist theory of perception fits neatly with both the pure extramissionist response and the simultaneous input-output response. It is also consistent with the input-followed-by-output response, if it is assumed (as naïve realists typically do) that causal processes involving light and visual processing mechanisms are enabling conditions of perceptual experiences that constitutively depend on their objects. The naïve realist theory of perception can therefore claim to better explain and articulate the phenomenological character of experience than the intentionalist: it can explain all the responses that the intentionalist can, plus some that the intentionalist cannot.

Of course, the representationalist might seek to explain away this aspect of the phenomenological character of experience, in much the same way that the sense-datum theorist explains away the transparency

intuition and Broad himself thought that perceptual experience isn't really saltatory and prehensive. But in so doing, this would involve a commitment to a theory of nature of perceptual experience according to which our best judgments about the nature of experience are mistaken.

#### 4. Hallucination

Accounting for the phenomenology of perceptual experience is only one of the dimensions along which philosophical theories of perception are evaluated. As Martin (2002) argues, representationalist appeals to the transparency of experience can be understood as depending for their force on the thought that they are best able to explain the phenomenological character of experience in a way that is consistent with the possibility of illusion and hallucination: cases in which something in the environment looks other than it is, and cases in which it seems to the subject as if there is something in their environment that isn't there at all. Even if it is conceded that the naïve realist provides a better explanation of the phenomenological character of experience than the intentionalist, it might still be argued that intentionalism is, on balance, a better theory overall, because it gives a better account of illusion and hallucination.

A common naïve realist strategy for accounting for illusion and (particularly) hallucination is to combine a naïve realist theory of perception with a form of disjunctivism. According to standard forms of disjunctivism, perception (on the one hand) and illusion and hallucination (on the other) are essentially, or most fundamentally, different kinds of mental event: either S perceives, or it is merely as if S perceives.<sup>15</sup> Much of the contemporary literature on naïve realist theories of perception has been concerned with the naïve realist's commitment to a form of disjunctivism, focusing in particular on disjunctivist accounts of hallucination; this is because hallucinations are often

15. Not all disjunctivists treat illusion and hallucination as fundamentally different; some subsume illusions under the “good” disjunct. See Byrne and Logue (2008) for further discussion.

considered to be the more difficult case for the naïve realist. Again, Merleau-Ponty provides an interesting and distinctive perspective on this debate.

Merleau-Ponty accepts a form of disjunctivism (cf. Berezden 2013). For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experiences “in the full sense of the term” are essentially relational (§1). Hallucinations differ fundamentally from veridical perceptual experiences in this respect: there is an “essential difference” between perception and hallucination (PP 352), such that someone who is hallucinating “does not see and does not hear in the normal sense” (PP 357). Specifically, whereas perception involves communion or communication “with an insurmountable plenitude” (PP 337, 354), hallucinations “play out on a different stage” (PP 355).<sup>16</sup>

Much of the recent debate about disjunctivism focuses on hallucinations that are in principle subjectively indistinguishable from veridical perceptual experiences. Merleau-Ponty’s account of hallucination, however, starts from the observation that as a matter of empirical fact, many actual hallucinations are subjectively *discriminable* from veridical perceptual experiences — or at any rate, it is often possible to tell that you are perceiving when you are perceiving, even if it is not always possible to tell that you are hallucinating when you are hallucinating. Merleau-Ponty presents a number of examples from the psychopathological literature to illustrate the point. For instance, a schizophrenic patient who claims to see someone at a certain location in the garden is “astonished when someone is actually placed in the garden, at the spot indicated, in the same outfit, and standing with the same posture”. Similarly, an alcoholic subject “who sees the doctor’s

hand as a guinea pig immediately notices that a genuine pig has been placed in the other hand” (PP 350).<sup>17</sup>

According to Merleau-Ponty, we are typically able to tell when we are perceiving because hallucinated objects lack the “mark of reality” (PP 359) characteristic of objects that are veridically perceived. It is as if hallucinated objects are “superimposed” onto the perceived world (PP 355). Whereas “[t]he real lends itself to an infinite exploration, it is inexhaustible” (PP 338) — that is, we can investigate real objects from different perspectives and in different conditions — the hallucinated world “lacks the plenitude and the internal articulation that makes it the case that the real thing remains ‘in itself’, or acts and exists by itself” (PP 355).

Of course, although it is often possible to tell that you are perceiving (and not hallucinating) when you are perceiving, an important part of the phenomena that needs accounting for is that it is nevertheless possible to be deceived by hallucinations when you are having them. Merleau-Ponty argues that even though hallucinations may lack the mark of reality, they can nevertheless have “*the value of reality*” (PP 358): they can “supplant” perceptions, give rise to affective responses, and motivate distinctive kinds of behaviour. The reason for this, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that there is a shared basis to both perception and hallucination. In particular, both are modalities of a “single primordial function by which we arrange around ourselves a milieu with a definite structure”, and it is because of this shared basis that we can be deceived when we are hallucinating: “*this fiction can only count as reality because reality itself is reached for the normal subject in an analogous operation*” (PP 358). The shared basis is what Merleau-Ponty calls “faith”, or “primordial” or “originary opinion”: “the movement that carries us beyond subjectivity, that places us in the world prior to every science and every verification ... or that, on the contrary, becomes bogged down in our private appearances” (PP 359). This shared basis to perception and

16. Merleau-Ponty makes similar remarks about illusions. For instance, of the patch of sunlight on the path that he sees as a stone, he says, “I cannot say that I ever see the flat stone in the sense in which I will see the patch of sunlight while moving closer” (PP 310); this is because we do not “gear into” illusions. However, I will set illusions aside here, and remain neutral on whether Merleau-Ponty’s account of hallucinations can be extended to account for illusions.

17. Merleau-Ponty’s focus on actual cases of hallucination is something stressed by Romdehn-Romluc (2009).

hallucination is grounded in the fact that we are embodied subjects with sensory fields that give us access to a transcendent world.

On Merleau-Ponty's account, hallucination is — or at least is like — a form of sensory imagination: the type of perception-like mental event that involves thinking about how things look, sound, taste, or smell, as when we visualise an apple or “picture with the mind's ear” the peal of church bells. Whereas perception involves “gearing into” the world via the body, we do not “gear into” the world in imagination. When we sensorily imagine something, the world does not provide the same kind of friction or resistance that it provides when we perceive: “Imagination is without depth; it does not respond to our attempts to vary our points of view; it does not lend itself to our observation” (PP 338).<sup>18</sup> Hallucination is like imagination in this respect. Someone who hallucinates is not “geared into” the world, but instead “fabricate[s] for himself, with the debris of this world, an artificial milieu conforming to the total intention of his being” (PP 357). Hallucinated objects are not part of the inter-subjectively accessible world, and as such lack the “depth” that is characteristic of real objects: “The hallucinatory thing is not like the real thing, packed with little perceptions that sustain it in existence”, and it is for this reason that it is as if “The hallucination is not in the world, but rather ‘in front of’ it” (PP 355). Both imagination and hallucination nevertheless presuppose our being-in-the-world. It is only because we are bodily subjects with sensory fields who are embedded within the world that hallucination and imagination are possible:

The world remains the vague place of all our experiences. It accommodates, pell-mell, true objects as well as individual and fleeting fantasies — because it is an individual that encompasses everything and not a collection of objects linked together through causal relations. To have hallucinations and, in general, to imagine is to exploit

18. Merleau-Ponty does not discuss imagination in much detail, though it is clear from what he does say that his view of the imagination is at least broadly similar to the view that Sartre presents in more detail in *The Imaginary* (1940).

this tolerance of the pre-predicative world as well as our vertiginous proximity to all being in syncretic experience (PP 359).

The view that hallucination is, or is like, a form of sensory imagination — typically, a form of sensory imagination over which subjects lack direct voluntary control — is popular in the psychopathological literature (e.g. Bentall 1990; cf. Allen 2015). At least in part this is because it provides a compelling account of a broad range of empirical cases, like those Merleau-Ponty considers, in which the phenomenal character of hallucination is more like that of an episode of sensory imagining than a perceptual experience, and so which are subjectively discriminable from veridical perceptual experiences.

The general view that hallucination is, or is like, a form of sensory imagination does not of itself entail a disjunctivist theory of perception. It is possible, for instance, to hold that there is a common element to perception and imagination — the having of an image, or the tokening of a representational content — and that the difference between the two is solely a difference in the extrinsic causal relations that this common element stands in. This would be an Empiricist account of hallucination that Merleau-Ponty would dismiss on the grounds that it cannot account for the subjective *discriminability* of actual hallucinations; attending to the empirical details, Merleau-Ponty thinks, shows that “hallucination is not a sensory content” (PP 350).

But even if the view that hallucination is, or is like, a form of sensory imagination does not entail a disjunctivist theory of perception, it represents a promising account of hallucination from the disjunctivist perspective.<sup>19</sup> Contemporary disjunctivists often give negative, relational characterisations of hallucination, as mental events that are subjectively indiscriminable from veridical perceptual experiences. According to Martin (2004), for instance, there is nothing more to the

19. See Allen (2015) for further discussion and defence. For the claim that hallucination is a distinctive mode of consciousness (and so which at least has affinities to the view that hallucination is like sensory imagination), see Campbell (2014: 90–4) and Ivanov (ms.).

phenomenal character of an hallucination than its being subjectively indiscriminable from a veridical perceptual experience. According to Fish (2009), hallucinations lack phenomenal character altogether, and hallucinating subjects merely form mistaken higher-order beliefs about the phenomenal character of hallucinations. (Martin and Fish focus primarily on “causally matching” hallucinations that are in principle indistinguishable; more on these below.) But negative, relational characterisations of hallucination are liable to seem dissatisfying; it is tempting to agree with Dancy (1995) that a more direct characterisation of hallucination in mental terms ought to be possible. The view that hallucination is, or is like, a form of imagination provides a way for the disjunctivist to give a positive account of the negative disjunct, and thereby satisfy this desire for further explanation.

By identifying hallucinations with episodes of sensory imagining—perception-like episodes with phenomenal character—the disjunctivist can provide an account of why hallucinations are not distinguished from veridical perceptual experience in cases in which they are not, without seemingly taking subjective indiscriminability for granted (compare Siegel’s 2008 objection to Martin 2004). Nor does this form of disjunctivism reduce hallucination to false judgment (like Fish 2009). From Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, this kind of Intellectualist account of hallucination also falsifies the phenomena. People who hallucinate do not, Merleau-Ponty claims, typically believe or judge that they are perceiving:

madmen do not *believe* they *see* or, so long as they are questioned, they correct their declarations on this point. The hallucination is not a rash judgment or belief for the same reasons that prevent it from being a sensory content: judgment or belief could only consist in positing the hallucination as true, and this is precisely what the patients do not do. On the level of judgment, patients distinguish between hallucination and perception (PP 350–1).

The underlying problem with Intellectualist accounts of hallucination—a problem which Intellectualist accounts share with Empiricist accounts, because both are expressions of “Objective Thought”—is that they fail to appreciate the hallucination’s “own mode of certainty and its immanent sense” (PP 351). That is, they fail to account for the distinctive phenomenal character of actual hallucinations.

It might be suggested that Merleau-Ponty’s account of hallucination faces a version of the “screening off” objection that is often leveled against contemporary forms of disjunctivism (cf. Martin 2004). According to the “screening off” objection, if whatever occurs when we hallucinate also occurs when we veridically perceive, then the common element to hallucination and perception threatens to “screen off” from the explanation of the phenomenal character of veridical perceptual experience whatever is unique to the good case; in particular, it threatens to render irrelevant to the explanation of the phenomenal character of experience the subject’s relationship to mind-independent objects, properties, and relations in the world. Assuming that there is a common element to hallucination and perception that is sufficient to account for the phenomenal character of experience, then this would establish the “common kind assumption”: that hallucination and perception are fundamentally the same kind of mental event, contrary to claim of the disjunctivist. Applying this line of reasoning in Merleau-Ponty’s case, even though perception (“in the full sense”) and hallucination differ essentially, both are the result of the “single primordial function” by virtue of which we arrange around ourselves a milieu. It might be suggested that this common function “screens off” openness to the world in the explanation of the phenomenal character of veridical perceptual experience.

But it is not clear that the common function underlying perception and hallucination is best thought of as a common element to perception and hallucination. Instead, it can be thought of—consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s claim that perception and hallucination differ essentially—as an *enabling* condition for perception and hallucination. It is in virtue of this primordial function that perception and hallucination

are possible, but of itself this primordial function is not sufficient to explain the phenomenal character of a veridical perceptual experience. The single primordial function partly determines the nature of the world that is available to the subject. As Merleau-Ponty says in explaining his hesitation to describe what he earlier calls the “intentional arc” underpinning conscious life in terms of a searchlight:

the comparison to a searchlight is not a good one, since it takes for granted the given objects upon which intelligence projects its light, whereas the core function we are speaking of here — prior to making us see or know objects — first more secretly brings them into existence for us (PP 137).

But the operation of this primordial function is not of itself sufficient to determine the phenomenal character of a particular veridical perceptual experience. This is determined, at least in part, by the operation of the gaze; and this, in turn, depends on whether the world affords exploration by the gaze.

A second version of the “screening off” objection is that if hallucination also involves taking the world to be a certain way, then this represents a common element to perception and hallucination that threatens to “screen off” whatever else is uniquely true of veridical perceptual experience. But this does not provide a common element to perception and hallucination that is sufficient to explain the phenomenal character of experience, either. For Merleau-Ponty there is always a phenomenally discernible difference between hallucination and perception, and this is because perception involves “commerce with a harsh, resistant, and intractable world” (PP 358) in a way that hallucination does not. Openness to a transcendent world is necessary for the distinctive kind of contact or communion with an insurmountable plenitude that veridical perceptual experience involves.

A third objection, following on from this, is that Merleau-Ponty’s account doesn’t address the types of hallucinations that are most commonly discussed in the philosophical literature: hallucinations that are

in principle indistinguishable from veridical perceptual experiences, because their proximate causes in the brain are identical to those of corresponding veridical perceptual experiences. Suppose, for instance, that a device could be fitted to the optic nerve that exactly reproduces the signal that would be received from the retina if the world were a certain way that it is not. Would the experiences caused by this device be of the same fundamental kind as those the subject would enjoy were they caused by the scene in front of them? Or, to take a more extreme case, if it were possible to stimulate an envatted brain in the appropriate ways, would they have experiences of the same fundamental kind as a normal embodied subject embedded within the world?

These purely hypothetical cases of “causally matching” hallucination are central to presentations of the causal argument from hallucination in contemporary Anglophone philosophy of perception. The argument starts from the claim that the proximate causal conditions in the brain are sufficient for (or fix the chances of) the occurrence of a veridical perceptual experience, even if the candidate object of perception is not present. Given the principle *same proximate cause, same immediate effect*, it follows that whatever would happen when we hallucinate in these circumstances would also happen when we veridically perceive. Assuming, in turn, that this common effect would “screen off” whatever is true just of the case in which we veridically perceive, then a subject’s openness to the world is rendered irrelevant to the explanation of the phenomenal character of their experience; and this would establish the common kind assumption.

This strengthened version of the causal argument attempts to block the Merleau-Pontian account by envisaging a situation in which the proximate causes of perceptual experience in the brain generate experiences that are indistinguishable in every respect from a veridical perceptual experience. The envisaged situation, however, is one whose possibility Merleau-Ponty would deny. The causal argument from hallucination depends on the principle that Martin calls “Experiential Naturalism”: that perceptual experiences are “themselves part of the natural causal order, subject to broadly physical and psychological



causes" (Martin 2006: 357). This principle is one that Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects; as he says in criticising Empiricist views of hallucination, for instance, we cannot assume that "through the effect of certain physiological causes, such as the irritation of the nervous centres, sensible givens would appear as they appear in perception, through the action of physical stimuli upon the same nervous centres" (PP 351). For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experiences do not supervene locally on a subject's brain state, or even the state of their central nervous system more generally. The character of perceptual experience depends instead on the nature of the subject's entire body and the environment in which they are embedded. The physical events that take place in the brain and central nervous system are at best enabling conditions of perceptual experience; they make perceptual experience of the subject's environment possible, without determining the nature of that experience. As Merleau-Ponty says in the *Structure of Behaviour*, we cannot understand the "sum of the nerve events which are produced in each point of the cortex" as the cause of experience, since "[t]his whole can be only the *condition of existence* of such and such a sensible scene; it accounts for the *fact that* I perceive but not for *that which* I perceive" (SB 206). That is, activity in the brain and central nervous system can explain the occurrence of perceptual experiences, but we need to advert to things in the subject's environment to understand what those experiences are experiences of.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Experiential Naturalism may be a manifestation of a more broadly idealistic outlook; I will return to this below (see §5). Many contemporary naïve realists would be reluctant to follow Merleau-Ponty in this direction. As Martin explains, Experiential Naturalism is a widely accepted "methodological or regulative assumption of both empirical work on sense experience and philosophical discussion of it" (Martin 2006: n.8); it does not of itself involve a commitment to any form of reductive physicalism, just to the much more minimal claim that experiences do not stand outside of the causal order. Whether naïve realists should accept Experiential

Naturalism warrants further discussion, but I will set this aside here.<sup>20</sup> For those naïve realists who would not want to follow Merleau-Ponty in rejecting Experiential Naturalism, it is worth noting that the rejection of Experiential Naturalism is independent of Merleau-Ponty's claim that physical activity in the brain and central nervous system is an enabling condition of veridical perceptual experience. It is possible to accept *both* Experiential Naturalism *and* the claim that processing in the brain and central nervous system is an enabling condition of veridical perceptual experience, if perceptual processing is an enabling condition of an essentially relational experience that is caused by the worldly state of affairs that partly constitutes it (e.g. Kalderon 2011a). Moreover, Experiential Naturalism can be accepted consistently with the view that hallucination is a form of sensory imagination if, in response to the causal argument from hallucination, the principle *same proximate cause, same immediate effect* does not hold where there are additional conditions necessary for the occurrence of certain kinds of mental events: in the case of perception, the presence of a mind-independent object; and in the case of imagination and hallucination, the absence of a mind-independent object (for further discussion, see Allen 2015).

## 5. Realism and Transcendental Naïve Realism

I have argued so far that Merleau-Ponty accepts interesting and distinctive versions of a number of the key theoretical commitments of contemporary naïve realist theories of perception. I want to conclude by pointing to one way in which Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception may differ importantly from the naïve realist's, and by highlighting a further possible meta-philosophical difference between Merleau-Ponty's approach and that of contemporary naïve realists that opens up an avenue for further exploration.

20. Experiential Naturalism is often rejected by opponents of the Causal Theory of Perception with Wittgensteinian sympathies (e.g. White 1961). It is rejected in a different way by Stoneham (2008), who denies that there are experiences at all. For further discussion, see Allen (2016: Chapter 5).



Merleau-Ponty's denial of Experiential Naturalism may be symptomatic of a broader contrast between his approach and that of many contemporary naïve realists: Merleau-Ponty's approach, at least in *Phenomenology of Perception*, appears to be broadly idealistic in a way contemporary forms of naïve realism tend not to be. This may in turn be related, at least contingently, to the particular meta-philosophical attitude that Merleau-Ponty adopts towards his theory of perception: to the extent that he accepts a naïve realist theory of perception, Merleau-Ponty's view can be described as accepting a form of *transcendental naïve realism*.

Merleau-Ponty is working in the post-Kantian tradition, and like Husserl before him, he sees phenomenology as a form of transcendental enquiry. This involves, at a minimum, identifying transcendental conditions that provide "how possible" explanations of phenomena like our experience of the world; as Merleau-Ponty says on the very first page of the Preface to *Phenomenology*, phenomenology is "a transcendental philosophy that suspends the affirmations of the natural attitude in order to understand them" (PP lxx). For Merleau-Ponty, the lived-body represents a transcendental condition of perception; this is why he says in the Introduction to Part Two of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that "[t]he theory of the body is already a theory of perception" (PP 209). The lived-body plays a role roughly analogous to Kant's transcendental Ego. For Kant, the objective character of perception — the fact that it is experience of an independent world — is possible in virtue of the unity of the transcendental subject and its capacity to order representations using *a priori* concepts of the understanding. For Merleau-Ponty, the lived-body plays a broadly similar explanatory role: the body "is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it" (PP 209), and perception of an independent world is possible because the unity of the object is experienced as "the correlate of the unity of our body" (PP 210). Merleau-Ponty rejects the existence of Kant's transcendental Ego, and correspondingly the Kantian world of things-in-themselves; but

he appears to retain something of Kant's idealism about the perceived world.<sup>21</sup>

Merleau-Ponty insists that things in the world transcend particular experiences of them. Given its embodied basis, perceptual experience necessarily provides us with only a perspectival, indeterminate, and ambiguous hold on an "inexhaustible" world that lends itself "to an infinite exploration" (PP 338).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty thinks that we cannot make sense of things independent of *all* possible experience of them. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is transcendental, but not what might be called strongly mind-independent. This, for instance, is the grain of truth that Merleau-Ponty thinks is contained within Berkeley's "Master Argument" for (subjective) idealism:

The thing can never be separated from someone who perceives it; nor can it ever actually be in itself because its articulations are the very ones of our existence, and because it is posited at the end of a gaze or at the conclusion of a sensory exploration that invests it with humanity (PP 334).

It is not just that the perceived world is primary in the epistemological sense that our knowledge of it comes, in the first instance, through perception. Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest, moreover, that the perceived world enjoys a kind of metaphysical primacy:

To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge, this world of which knowledge always *speaks*, and this world with regard to which every

21. For further discussion of similarities between Merleau-Ponty and Kant, see e.g. Gardner (2015) and Matherne (2016).

22. Compare Merleau-Ponty's discussion of his experience of his neighbour's house, which tries to steer a course between thinking of the house as being "the house seen from nowhere" and the fact that perception is perspectival. As Merleau-Ponty says, foreshadowing his subsequent development of this point, the challenge is "to understand how vision can come about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its perspective" (PP 69). For insightful discussion, see Matherne (2017).

scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent (PP lxxii).<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say that for Merleau-Ponty there are two worlds, the phenomenal and the objective, such that the latter depends metaphysically upon the former. Nor is Merleau-Ponty best understood as claiming that the “objective world” is unreal (cf. PrP 35). But he at least seems to think that scientific descriptions of the world are abstractions from lived experience that necessarily distort its lived character (cf. Dillon 1997: 86–93).

To the extent that Merleau-Ponty’s view in the *Phenomenology* is a form of idealism, Merleau-Ponty cannot naturally be described as accepting a naïve realist theory of perception; at best he may be said to share some of the naïve realist’s core theoretical commitments. It is controversial, however, whether Merleau-Ponty’s view in the *Phenomenology* really is — or at any rate, ought to be — a form of idealism.<sup>24</sup> Commenting on the *Phenomenology*, Beaufret, for example, claims that Merleau-Ponty’s main problem is that he has not been “sufficiently radical”, because (following Husserl) his phenomenological descriptions “retain the vocabulary of idealism”, even if phenomenology itself, when fully developed, may require “the abandonment of subjectivity and the vocabulary of subjective idealism” (PrP 41–2). Certainly the intimation of idealism in the *Phenomenology* seems to be something that Merleau-Ponty himself became dissatisfied with. As he says in working notes for the later (posthumously published) work *The Visible and the Invisible*, if we accept the view of the relationship between the phenomenal and the objective suggested in the *Phenomenology*, then we cannot understand how facts about the “objective” body — for instance,

23. See also Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “the body — as a chemical structure or a collection of tissues — is formed through a process of impoverishment beginning from a primordial phenomenon of the body-for-us” (PP 367).

24. And insofar as Merleau-Ponty is an idealist, it is also controversial whether this is necessarily problematic. Compare, for example, Pihlström’s description of the “idealist objection” to the use of transcendental arguments as an oxymoron (2004: 310, n. 12).

cerebral lesions, like that suffered by Schneider — can dramatically affect the “phenomenal” body and its relation to the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, this problem is symptomatic of the fact that in the *Phenomenology* he starts from the “consciousness”-“object” distinction, rendering the problems he considers there “insoluble” (July 1959, VI 200). Because the distinction is so heavily embedded within the *Phenomenology*—in its structure, argument, and language—Merleau-Ponty is ultimately unable to escape the dualistic framework that he attempts to overcome (cf. Barbaras 2004: 3–19). He tries to address this problem in his later work through the introduction of the “flesh”, the “element” or “incarnate principle” of which everything partakes (VI 139), and by reconceiving of the phenomenal and the objective not as two “sides”, “leaves”, or “layers”, but as intertwined, like the obverse and reverse, or like two segments of a circle (VI 137–8).

Whether Merleau-Ponty’s attempts to overcome the problems that arise for the *Phenomenology* are successful is not something I will consider here; nor will I consider the related question of to what extent Merleau-Ponty’s later work differs substantively from his earlier work.<sup>25</sup> Instead, I want to close by briefly highlighting an avenue for further exploration that the consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception helps to disclose: the possibility of understanding the naïve realist theory of perception as a transcendental theory of perception.

Contemporary naïve realist theories of perception are often presented as one philosophical theory of perception amongst others, to be defended by inference to the best explanation, and to be assessed on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis that weighs performance along a number of different dimensions: for instance, fidelity to appearances, simplicity, systematicity, fit with scientific theories, and so on. On this view, naïve realism is a philosophical theory of the same basic kind as, and in direct competition with, intentionalist and sense-datum theories. Compared to these alternatives, naïve realism is generally considered to be the philosophical theory of perception that best articulates

25. See e.g. Dillon 1997: 85 (and following) for some discussion.

the phenomenological character of experience. But one of the pressing challenges for the naïve realist at this point is to explain why fidelity to the appearances should be accorded any particular privilege in deciding between competing philosophical theories of perception. At best, it might be suggested that respecting the appearances is one consideration amongst many, which provides a defeasible reason for accepting a philosophical theory of perception, but which can be outweighed by theoretical costs or benefits elsewhere; at worst it might be suggested that respecting the appearances is not a relevant consideration at all, any more than it would be if we were trying to explain why people believe in ghosts.<sup>26</sup>

When viewed from a transcendental perspective, however, the naïve realist theory of perception takes on a different cast. Like naïve realism, transcendental naïve realism is a philosophical theory of perception: the transcendental attitude is not supposed to be an attitude that we ordinarily or naïvely adopt, but is a distinctive meta-philosophical attitude that we can adopt towards a philosophical theory like naïve realism. Broadly speaking, the transcendental naïve realist will not see naïve realism simply as one philosophical theory of perception among others. Rather they will see it as having a special status amongst philosophical theories of perception; indeed they are likely to see it as being, in some sense, immune to falsification. Viewed from the transcendental perspective, naïve realism is part of the transcendental project of explaining how it is possible that perceptual experience has the distinctive characteristics that it does. Although there are different ways of understanding exactly what this involves, it is likely to involve some, or all, of the following: using transcendental arguments, identifying transcendental conditions for the possibility of perceptual experience having the distinctive characteristics that it does, and according an essential role to subjects and subjectivity.<sup>27</sup>

26. For a version of this kind of objection, see e.g. Hawthorne and Kovakovich (2006: 180).

27. For further discussion of what, if anything, is common to all manifestations of transcendental philosophy, see e.g. Pihlström (2004). Note that

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perception suggests one form that a transcendental naïve realist theory of perception can take. Rather than seeing the naïve realist theory of perception as that which provides the best explanation of the phenomenological character of experience, for example, a transcendental naïve realist can use the phenomenological character of experience as a premiss in a transcendental argument for naïve realism: perceptual experience puts us into contact with our environment, and it is a condition of the possibility of perceptual experience putting us into contact with our environment that perceptual experience is essentially relational. It is not just that this aspect of the phenomenological character of experience is *best* explained by the naïve realist theory of perception; it would not be possible if naïve realism were false.<sup>28</sup>

In turn, a transcendental naïve realist can follow Merleau-Ponty in arguing that the possibility of perceptual experience being essentially relational is itself grounded in the distinctive nature of perceiving subjects: that it is a condition of the possibility of being consciously acquainted with objects in our environment that we are ourselves embodied subjects, embedded in the world. Were we not bodily subjects

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Merleau-Ponty himself diverges from — or, as he sees it, develops to its logical conclusion — the Kantian view that transcendental philosophy involves identifying *a priori* transcendental conditions insofar as he thinks it is necessary to reinterpret the traditional notion of the *a priori*. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no distinction in kind between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*: they are “truths on the same level”, and differ to the extent that “[t]he *a priori* is the fact as understood, made explicit, and followed through into all of the consequences of its tacit logic; the *a posteriori* is the isolated and implicit fact” (PP 230). Nor does transcendental philosophy for Merleau-Ponty involve identifying necessary conditions as these are normally understood, either: “Human existence will lead us to revisit our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because human existence is the change of contingency into necessity through the act of taking up” (PP 174).

28. Other arguments for naïve realism can also be cast as transcendental arguments: for instance, perhaps conscious acquaintance with our environment is a condition of the possibility of demonstrative reference to objects (cf. Campbell 2002), knowledge of what objects are like (cf. Logue 2012), or (combining a naïve realist theory of perception with a naïve realist theory of colour) the qualitative character of conscious experience (cf. Fish 2009, Kalderon 2011a, Allen 2016).

who are “in and toward the world” (PP 103), then we could not be consciously acquainted with things in our environment.

This sketch of a transcendental naïve realist theory of perception requires further elaboration and defence. One of the central challenges is whether it is possible to divorce naïve realism understood as a transcendental theory of perception from a broadly idealistic framework, whilst at the same time guaranteeing that there is an interesting sense in which naïve realism is immune to falsification. Indeed, given that dissociating transcendental approaches to philosophical problems from transcendental idealism is one of the key problematics of the neo-Kantian Oxford Realism out of which contemporary naïve realist theories of perception developed, it is an interesting question whether, and to what extent, some contemporary defences of naïve realism can already be understood as defences of forms of transcendental naïve realism. I will not pursue these questions further here.<sup>29</sup> But I hope at least that the discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception serves to bring into focus the possibility of a transcendental naïve realism, according to which the naïve realist theory of perception is a manifestation of our being-in-the-world.<sup>30</sup>

29. Dissociating transcendental philosophy from transcendental idealism is a key theme in the work of Strawson. I develop and discuss a form of transcendental naïve realism from a Strawsonian perspective in Allen forthcoming. The idea that a relational (but not naïve realist) theory of perception can be established by transcendental argument is defended by McDowell (2008), and it is possible to interpret Campbell (2002) as presenting a transcendental argument for naïve realism in claiming that only naïve realism is able to explain the possibility of demonstrative reference to objects.

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 SNS *Sense and Non-sense*, 1948. Translated by H.L. Dreyfus and P.A. Dreyfus. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992.  
 SoB *The Structure of Behaviour*, 1942. Translated by A.L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.  
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